

Shrewsbury Public Schools

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent



Statement on Bullying

April 13, 2010

Dear Shrewsbury Families,

The issue of bullying has never been more discussed across Massachusetts, due to the combination of media coverage of the tragedy in South Hadley and the pending anti-bullying legislation on Beacon Hill. Some of you may have read a recent Telegram & Gazette column, which referred to a recent bullying issue at Sherwood Middle School. As I stated to the columnist, I believe the school's response to this particular situation was immediate, thorough, and well communicated to all involved. Across our entire school district, we do our best to be vigilant in order to identify bullying when it is occurring, and we intervene in ways that, in our judgment, will provide the most effective remedy. We also have a number of proactive strategies in place, all designed to promote respectful, positive school cultures. This combination of prevention and intervention minimizes the occurrence of bullying behavior in our schools and stops problematic behavior before it mushrooms.

While we are fortunate that we have been able to maintain school environments where bullying is infrequent, it is important to recognize that it exists and that we should do everything we can to minimize it. One of the insidious features of bullying is that it often occurs without the knowledge of adults, be they educators, parents, coaches, or others who are responsible for monitoring our children's behavior. Our schools are working to empower students to recognize and stand up against inappropriate behavior—not only if one is the target of inappropriate teasing or harassment, but especially if one is a bystander. Harnessing the power of peer pressure to create school environments where bullying behaviors are not considered to be "cool" is a key element in minimizing these problems. Further, promoting an atmosphere where students feel safe to share concerns with adults in order to seek help, for themselves or for fellow students in need, prevents the kind of underground culture that allows bullying to thrive unnoticed. This is also why it is important for parents to let the school know if they suspect that there is a problem, as no matter how observant we are, there will be things that we miss.

The proliferation of online bullying, with its dynamics of anonymity and constant connectivity, makes our challenge much more complex. The headline of the Telegram & Gazette column was "Parents need to get involved to fight bullies." I agree. But I would add that educators, students, and community members also need to be involved, because no one group will be successful at minimizing bullying unless the others are as well. We in the schools will continue to work to get better at prevention and intervention, and I implore to you to join us in this effort. As parents, we can make a significant difference by communicating with our children about how they are doing,

The Shrewsbury Public Schools, in partnership with the community, will provide students with the skills and knowledge for the 21st century, an appreciation of our democratic tradition, and the desire to continue to learn throughout life.

articulating our expectations for how they treat others, monitoring their behavior (including online), modeling respect for all, and refusing to be a bystander when other children or other adults act in ways that are toxic to our community's well being. Collectively, we have a great deal of influence over how our children develop their character and treat one another in our schools, in our neighborhoods, on our ball fields, and on the Internet. As your superintendent and a fellow parent and community member, I am very proud of our students' accomplishments in academics, community service, performing and fine arts, and athletics, and I am pleased that the vast majority of our students demonstrate respectful behavior towards adults and peers. However, there are still too many instances where our kids aren't nice to each other, especially to those who are most vulnerable. We need your partnership in the difficult, ongoing work of instilling the kind of values we desire in all of our students, so that their actions demonstrate consideration, kindness, and the courage to do what is right. Doing so will make a great community even stronger.

Respectfully,

Joe Sawyer